Primal forms

Swedish designer and artist Mattias Seliden sees the objects he creates as items of furniture as much as they are works of art, and calls his growing collection his "little wooden friends". He discusses his elemental forms with the American critic and curator Glenn Adamson.

WRITTEN: Glenn Adamson
PHOTOGRAPHY: Vincent Sjögren
Seldten calls his objects his "little wooden friends", only a little ironically. They recently participated in the group show A New Problem, curated by Glenn Adamson at New York gallery Friedman Benda.

At the age of 14, Mattias Seldten nearly failed woodwork at school, but now he is one of Sweden's most collected furniture designers. What happened in between is an interesting story. In 2010, he arrived at Konstfack, Stockholm's illustrious art school, and pursued an undergraduate degree, returning in 2017 to study for a master's. During this period he also delved into design theory, philosophy, carpentry, and architecture. In 2015, he considered dropping out to become a chef. At the time he was searching for answers and inspiration. He read widely, but, as he puts it, "to consult Descartes in these matters is not very helpful. Believe me, I've tried."

What saved Seldten was a plank. It was beautiful, at least to him, with a unique, characterful curvature. He sat around in his studio untouched for weeks. Finally, he determined to make something with it, but the last thing he wanted was to cut it apart, plane it, and remove its character. Instead, he worked with it, taking the contours of the natural timber as a starting point.

Seldten has been following this pathway ever since, in what he describes as a "self-rewarding system". Each object replaces the next, opening up new problems and possibilities. He finds it important to have the right amount of raw materials at hand in the studio (too many planks, and they lose their uniqueness, becoming an undifferentiated mass; too few, and they become precious, inhibiting his creativity. He has found 20 to be about right. On occasion, he has found himself looking at one of his designs lying on his side, and that has suggested to him a new direction.

This totally unplanned creative process has gradually led Seldten to a whole family of objects, his "little wooden friends", as he calls them. They do indeed have a quality of animation about them, each with its own stance and personality, which makes them seem like living companions. They range from low stools to monumental bookshelves, with various bench and table forms in between. Yet the forms are not really specified to these purposes — they are just as much art objects as items of furniture.
Over the past year, Seldén has engaged in a "lockdown dialogue" with Friedman Benda, the leading New York design gallery. It began, like so many conversations these days, on Instagram. Soon it unfolded into a more wide-ranging three-way conversation between the artist, gallery principal Marc Benda and the writer Glenn Adamson. "Seldén clearly had a unique perspective and was growing exponentially over a short period of time," says Benda. "We wanted to lend support." After first including his work in a large-scale survey show entitled What Would Have Been – which documented the disruptions of 2020 – the gallery invited Seldén to participate in A New Realism, curated by Adamson. The exhibition, which opened in June, presents nine makers whose practices are founded in personal pragmatism, as a means to engage our tumultuous present.
Selldén's objects differ in scale and implied use, ranging from low stools to industrial bookshelves, with various bench and table forms in between.

"What happens in the computer is always in flux. Everything is always in a state of becoming rather than a state of being. And for me, it's only when something is that I can relate to it," says Selldén, discussing the hands-on quality of his objects.

Selldén's designs are often seemingly utilitarian, as if they had been frozen mid-stride. The surfaces may be painted, forming a plane, and the edges are often soft, allowing the observer to avoid the sharpness of the wood. Most of his work is handmade, with a sense of detail and craftsmanship. In some cases, he allows the edges of the wood to remain through the translucent glaze. Recently, he has been using small, tightly packed oils, which is in combination with a certain grain that provides what he calls a "biological" effect. With their expressive, down-to-earth nature, the structure of these objects is direct in the extreme. It is almost as if it has regained a new design language.

Is it possible to see, in these irregular objects, the outlines of a certain critical position? Their organic quality might speak to some environmental agenda, or perhaps simply an anti-modernist approach to the mimicking effects of mass production - a central theme of modern art for well over a century now. But while Bielenberg does bring to a certain uniformity to the over-processing that design so often entails - "why grind wood down to a smooth, glossy finish?" use a CNC router? Why not use the raw wood itself? - his stance is more progressive than pro-modernist. In Selldén's experience, theory tends to be unsatisfying; he realises the idea that his objects would have to "transmit" something, as if they were statements or arguments in material form. His intention is both more open-ended and more concrete than that; he wants to give another form to physicality itself.

Nevertheless, says Bielenberg, the growing dominance of the digital is having an impact on contemporary life. The digital environment is changing, and so are our perceptions. "We are in a state of becoming, rather than a state of being," says Bielenberg. And so it is, it's only when something is that I can relate to it."

His work is by no means global, but it is certainly intellectual, and it's something. He sees a particular relationship between people and objects, as a process of self-expression, as a state of being. It's about what we are and what we do, not just what we are. This can be read, as in many ways, as expressing the philosophical "I think, therefore I am." The answer is to act through the object I thing, therefore I am.